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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 002311

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BOLIVIA: DECEMBER 09 ELECTIONS: OFF TO THE RACES

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 b,d

¶1. (C) Summary: Opposition politicians are beginning to position themselves for the possible December 2009 presidential election. A presidential election will only take place in December 2009 if the draft Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) constitution is passed, and some politicians (particularly in the opposition-controlled half moon departments) are still focused on opposing the constitution in the January 25 referendum. Leftist parties and potential candidates are beginning to test the presidential waters, however, and a number of the smaller, non-MAS Leftist parties are suggesting that the only potential challenger to President Evo Morales must come from the ranks of the Left. End summary.

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Splintered Opposition
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¶2. (C) The small, non-MAS parties of the Left are attempting to promote themselves as an alternative to what some fear is an increasingly one-party state. Rene Joaquin, mayor of the city of Potosi and head of the Social Alliance party (which currently has only limited, regional presence) suggested that "the citizens want other political actors, and above all Bolivians are convinced that they want democracy, and democracy means plurality." (Comment: Joaquin has long been viewed as a potential alternative to Evo as he is indigenous - Quechua - and has established himself as an effective mayor. Joaquin's efforts thus far to establish a national following have failed to gather steam, however. End Comment.)

¶3. (C) Non-MAS parties such as National Unity, Social Alliance, and the indigenous party AYRA have all made public or private calls for the opposition Left to unite in a common front against the MAS: as National Unity leader Samuel Doria Medina said, otherwise the existence of over ten opposing fronts will "hand the election to the government." Thus far no leader seems to have volunteered to back out of the race or throw his party's support behind another leader, and privately many of the opposition parties of the Left tell us

that they view the other parties as "spoilers" in the election.

¶4. (C) What the Left's small opposition parties can agree on, however, is that the opposition of the Right has no chance. "I think that the conservative right will not have much success in today's political scene," opined ex-President Carlos Mesa, who has not declared himself for the December elections but who has told us privately that he plans to run. Despite growing concern over the economy, Mesa stated in an interview that he feels "the country is correctly on a path of change of the Left...the country wants a level of change that includes equality, more state participation, progressive decentralization, and inclusion..."

¶5. (C) Carlos Mesa, who had been eyeing an aggressive anti-constitution campaign as a means to launch his bid on the presidency, seems now to be reconsidering. In a meeting with the Charge October 27, Mesa all but acknowledged that Evo would win his new constitution in January and that there was little point in taking on the quixotic task of trying to defeat it. Mesa instead wants to focus on presenting an alternate vision for the country that is not against Evo but rather represents better change (than what Evo has offered so far). "So long as we don't take away the change message from Evo, we have no chance," Mesa commented. While not confident, Mesa believes that Evo could be defeated in a December 2009 election: "it (the election) is over a year away and that is a lifetime in Bolivian politics. Long-term in Bolivian politics these days is 24 hours," he joked. Mesa believes a souring economy and Evo's inability to improve the lives of Bolivians will weaken him. "Passage of a new constitution will raise everyone's expectations, but will people's quality of life improve? That will be the question," Mesa postulated. Mesa told us his party will be ideologically similar to a social democratic party and that he hoped to strengthen ties with the Democratic party. "We have nothing against the Republican party, and have in fact gotten support from IRI in the past, but we think we share more ideology with the Democrats," he added.

6, (C) Prominent indigenous intellectuals (and opposition AYRA party members) Fernando Untoja and Walter Reynaga recently also outlined to Emboffs their plan for a "new option" to confront Evo. They hope to attack Evo on indigenist grounds, pointing out that his cabinet is still majority white or mestizo and that he has not fulfilled his promises to the indigenous majority. They lack backing and allies, however, and like every other opposition group we speak with, they envision themselves as heading a new campaign, not falling in line with other elements of the opposition.

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Conservative Opposition "Not Dead Yet"
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¶7. (C) Although national analysts have been announcing the imminent or actual demise of the conservative opposition organization PODEMOS, our contacts with PODEMOS deny that they are out of the fight. PODEMOS strategist Javier Flores informed us on October 22 that the national party will focus on the economy, which they see as Evo's weak spot in the next year before the December 2009 election. Unlike the Leftist opposition parties, PODEMOS will not call for more state involvement in the economy, such as the MAS has already spearheaded.

¶8. (C) PODEMOS itself, however, is currently splintered between regional leaders of the opposition departments (Santa Cruz, Pando, Beni, Tarija, and Chuquisaca) and the national leadership under Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga. Mutual distrust between the factions grew with the national party's decision in the Senate to allow the August 10 recall referendum (which benefited Evo while losing the regional opposition the department of Cochabamba.) The national party is currently claiming victory in the negotiations in congress which on October 22 resulted in a compromise that will give Evo his

January 25 referendum in exchange for changes to the text of the MAS constitution. Meanwhile, some regional opposition leaders are calling the compromise a "betrayal".

MAS Denies Any Meaningful Opposition

¶9. (C) With a popular president and not yet feeling any public discontent from economic difficulties, the MAS is confident of re-election. Vice President Garcia Linera discounted the opposition and linked Evo to the text of the new constitution on October 26, saying, "The whole program of Bolivian transformation in the 21st century, at least in this decade, is in this constitutional text and President Evo heads it, he personifies it. What will they (the opposition) bring?" Garcia Linera went on to outline what he saw as the opposition's three major defeats: "electoral defeat in (the recall referenda in) August, military defeat in September, and political defeat in October...the agreements in Congress would not have been possible without these victories for the government and without these catastrophic electoral, political, and military defeats on the part of the fascist Right."

¶10. (C) In his interview, Garcia Linera specifically discounted the re-election chances of ex-presidents Tuto Quiroga and Carlos Mesa, saying that Quiroga lacked credibility and that Mesa had "had his moment." Garcia Linera described Bolivia as "Evista" (Evo-following) and repeatedly made links between Evo, the MAS, and autonomy.

Comment

¶11. (C) In belatedly portraying itself as the "autonomy" party, the MAS is astutely stealing the opposition's strongest card, leaving the opposition with an empty hand. Evo's personal popularity remains strong as evidenced by the 67 percent he obtained in the August recall referendum. Delivering a new constitution in January will further provide Evo a boost although he will then have to start meeting expectations. With the opposition fractured and turning on each other, however, Evo could face a relatively easy re-election in December 2009, as there are bound to be more competitors yet less actual competition.

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